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## Montgomery union battle heats up

All for one? Or, everyone for himself?

by Erin Cunningham and Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writers

As a Montgomery County librarian, Michael Marx says he feels responsible for educating the county's children in much the same way as classroom teachers.

Yet, Marx, who has been employed in the county for 29 years, says the county has gutted the library budget while throwing more money at schools.

Last year Marx, who works at the Kensington Park branch, was asked to take several days of unpaid leave. Teachers were not.

This year, the library budget is facing \$2.8 million in cuts, or 9.7 percent, while the school system is anticipating level funding under County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) proposal.

Marx and other county government employees also are being asked to pay more for their health care. Teachers, who already pay less out-of-pocket for their benefits, are not, although the council may take action to force the school system to shift more of health care costs to its employees.

Leggett is seeking to boost employee health care contributions from 20 percent to 30 percent. School system employees pay about 10 percent.

Under county law, the Montgomery County Board of Education negotiates contracts with education unions. The County Council approves a school system budget, but cannot dictate line-item spending.

"We've taken more of a hit than they have," said Marx, a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, referring to Montgomery County Public Schools employees.

The situation among public employees being paid from the same source reflects a gross imbalance, according to some government employees and County Council members.

"There is an inequity," said Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

The disparity goes back at least one year, he said, to the schools' employees rejection of furloughs, which forced county government employees to take as many as eight days of unpaid leave.

If Montgomery County Public Schools, which employs two-thirds of county government employees, had implemented furloughs, all workers would have lost 1.5 days of pay.

Still, school union representatives are rejecting the notion that they must fight county government unions to get the best possible deal for themselves.

During a labor event in Silver Spring on Monday, MCGEO President Gino Renne spoke of the need for unions to work together to benefit employees.

However, John Sparks, president of the Montgomery County Career Fire Fighters, said Tuesday that it appears the county government unions are working together — independent of the three unions that represent Montgomery County Public Schools employees.

"There's a lot of county employees who feel there is an inequity," he said.

The county's three education unions planned to protest cuts to education funding Tuesday night, after The Gazette's deadline.

They argue that Leggett's level funding for schools — about \$1.4 billion — is actually well below what the school system needs to keep up with its growing enrollment. The Board of Education is requesting \$1.5 billion from the county.

The crowd, expected to be in the hundreds, will rally in front of the Montgomery County Council building in Rockville.

MCGEO has hosted its own rallies this year opposing Leggett's proposals to reduce employees' take-home pay.

While no county government union leader has advocated that school system employees be forced to pay more for their benefits, Sparks said it's clear that the pain on one-third of the county's public work force would be lessened if education unions made some concessions.

Doug Prouty, president of the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), the county teachers union, argued that the proposal from Leggett to have county government workers pay a higher share of their health care premiums was bad for any group of employees whether it worked for the school system or the government, and did not address the central issue of containing health care costs.

"If anything, this offers us the opportunity to have a greater sense of unity than we've had before," Prouty said, referring to the government unions.

The most expensive health care plan on a per-capita basis offered by the school system covers 90 percent of health care premiums for employees, compared to 80 percent for county employees.

But in a December report, called "An Inconvenient Truth," on its website, MCEA pointed out that the county's own numbers show that for the insurance plans with the highest enrollment, the school system's monthly costs were lower than the county's. The union said this was because 60 percent of school employees enrolled in lower-cost HMOs. The school system has made the HMOs more attractive to employees by picking up 95 percent of the premiums.

For the insurance plans with the highest enrollment, MCEA said, the county paid \$545 less per month for a family insured under a school system policy than under a county government policy. The county paid \$190 less per month for a single employee on a school system policy than on a government policy.

The county police and fire unions in particular have criticized school unions in previous years, noted Dave Rodich, executive director of the Service Employees International Union Local 500, even as SEIU employees have made sacrifices. But he said it was a trap for the different unions to begin attacking each other based on Leggett's proposal.

"It becomes overly simplistic to just say, 'Well, we made this choice over there, therefore that's the exact same choice that needs to be made over here,'" Rodich said.